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AUTHOR Chapman, Chris; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated how differences in student characteristics might affect the relationship between heightened interest in national news and news-seeking behavior. Data were taken from the Youth Civic Involvement component of the 1996 National Household Education Survey. Telephone interviews were conducted with 9,041 students in grades 6 through 12. Results indicated that: (1) about half of the students had taken a course that required them to pay attention to government, politics, or national news during the current school year; (2) participation in such courses was higher for females than males, and higher for Black students and White students than Hispanic students; (3) no differences were found among students attending public or private schools; (4) 41% of students who took at least one course during the last 2 years reported their interest in politics and national issues increased "some" or "a good deal"; (5) no differences existed in interest in national issues associated with taking a current events course for gender, among racial/ethnic groups, or by the type of school attended; and (6) students who took a course and reported that their interest increased as a result were more likely to seek news in other ways than were students who took such courses that did not generate increased interest or students who did not take such a course in the last 2 years. Future research should continue to explore the role of education in preparing young people for responsible citizenship. (Contains 11 references, 3 tables, and a figure of data.) (KC)

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

Statistics in Brief July 1997

Student Interest in National News and its Relation to School Courses

Contact:
Kathryn Chandler
202-219-1767

Authors:
Chris Chapman
ESSI

Mary Jo Nolin
Karen Kline
Westat, Inc.

In a world changing as rapidly as ours, where knowing about current events is a responsibility of every adult citizen, it is important that our adolescents develop a desire to seek and appreciate knowledge about national and world issues. Research has shown that many schools attempt to bring current events into the classroom in a variety of ways (Holt 1990, Johnston and Brzezinski 1992). Still, not all schools do so. In a study involving 798 students from nine high schools, 41 percent indicated that they studied current events as part of a course, and 68 percent were exposed to regular news broadcasts in school (Anderman and Johnston 1994a). Reports from 1,148 students from four middle schools and nine high schools indicated that 55 percent of the students studied current events in school as part of a course (Anderman and Johnston 1994b).

Related to the issue of exposure to current events, and of concern to educators, are the findings that elementary and high school students do not appear to be intrinsically interested in serious news. Self-reports of interest in various news topics by high school students indicate that students are most interested in topics that relate to teens or current events that deal with entertainment and sports and least interested in foreign news and U.S. politics (Johnston 1995, Whitmore 1991). Limited evidence suggests that adjusting curricula to include current events can increase interest. Participating teachers in 135 inner-city and suburban schools described the U-WIN program (designed to incorporate newspapers into lesson plans) as successful in increasing the interest of the students in current events (Holt 1990). Another study involving high school students found that students who study news or watch TV news in school are more interested in current events than those who do not (Anderman and Johnston 1994a).

Research findings on the relationship of interest generated by school courses and the news-seeking behavior of students outside of school are mixed. A study comparing 1,500 students in grades 6 through 12 who watched Channel One at school with 1,500 students who did not found no difference in news-seeking behaviors (i.e., talking about news stories with others, watching or listening to news on TV or radio at home, or reading news magazines at home) (Johnston, Brzezinski, and Anderman 1994). Contradictory results were found in a study of 798 students in grades 9 through 12 that showed students who study news or watch TV news in school are more likely to engage in news-seeking behavior outside of school (Anderman and Johnston 1994a). The same study also found that male high school students are more likely to read or watch

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the news outside of school than are female high school students. These studies are limited, however, in that they do not explore potentially important student characteristics and how differences in these characteristics might affect the relationship between heightened interest and news-seeking behavior.

The National Household Education Survey (NHES) provides nationally representative data on student self-reports of courses at school that incorporate information about government, politics, or national issues and any related increase of interest in national issues and news-seeking behavior outside of school, as well as data on student and school characteristics. The NHES:96 was conducted by Westat for the National Center for Education Statistics. Telephone interviews were conducted with 8,043 students in grades 6 through 12. Data were also collected from 20,792 parents of children age 3 through 12th grade, although those data are not included in this report. More information about the parent and youth data, and about data collected from a national sample of adults and households, can be found in the *National Household Education Survey of 1996 Data File User's Manual*, Volumes 1-5 (Collins et al. forthcoming from NCES).

Current Report

In this Brief, data from the Youth Civic Involvement component were used to estimate participation of students in grades 6 through 12 in school courses that require students to pay attention to government, politics, or national news. These could have been full courses or course segments and are from here on referred to simply as "courses." Participation in such school courses and student self-reported increase in interest in politics or national issues as a result of participation in courses were examined in relation to student and school characteristics. Student news-seeking behavior was then investigated in association with participation in courses that incorporated discussion of government, politics, or national issues and reported increased interest in national news.[1]

Student Reports of Participation in Courses That Incorporate Government, Politics, or National Issues

One of the National Education Goals for the year 2000 is to prepare students for responsible citizenship. Schools can work toward this goal by helping students become aware of government and national issues (Quigley 1991). In the NHES:96, students were asked whether they had taken any courses that required them to pay attention to government, politics, or national issues during the current school year or in the past school year. (Data were collected from January 3 through April 13, 1996.) Approximately two-thirds (70 percent) of 6th through 12th grade students attending either public or private schools reported that they had taken at least one such course during the past 2 school years. About half of the students reported that they had taken a course during the current school year (52 percent), and about the same number (47 percent) reported that they had taken a course during the past school year (table 1).

Differences by student characteristics. Both gender and racial differences were found in reported participation in a course requiring attention to national issues. Participation in such courses over a 2-year period was higher among female students than among male students, as reported by 72 percent of girls versus 68 percent of boys. Within the same time frame, fewer Hispanic students (63 percent) than white students (70 percent) or black students (74 percent) reported taking a course. When looking just at courses taken during the current school year, gender differences are not pronounced, while racial differences change somewhat. A lower

[1] Student news-seeking behavior is a broad topic. This exploratory analysis focuses on its relation to school courses. Other potentially important factors such as family and community characteristics are beyond the scope of this report.

percentage of Hispanic students than black or white students still reported taking courses related to government or national issues, but black students were also more likely to take those courses in the current year than were white students. Fifty-eight percent of black students versus 52 percent of white students and 44 percent of Hispanic students reported taking a course during the current school year.

Students in grade 8 and those in grades 11 and 12 were more likely to take a course that requires them to pay attention to government, politics, or national news than were students in the lower grades of middle school or students in the early high school grades. Reports of taking such a course increased up to 8th grade, fell off in the early high school years, and picked up again in 11th and 12th grade. Students' reports of taking such courses during the previous school year were consistent with the current-year trend.

Differences by school type. No differences were found by school type in reports of courses that required students to pay attention to national issues taken this year, last year, or in the last 2 years. About half of the students attending public schools or private schools reported taking such a course each year, and about two-thirds took at least one course during the past 2 years.

Student Reports of an Increase in Interest as a Result of Taking a Course That Incorporated Government, Politics, or National Issues

Schools offering courses that require students to pay attention to national issues are doing so with the goal of increasing students' knowledge of and interest in government and national news. A followup question in the NHES:96 for students who indicated that they had taken such a course within the last 2 school years concerned the level of increase in interest in politics or national issues generated as a result of taking the course(s). Overall, 65 percent of students who took at least one course during the last 2 years reported their interest in politics and national issues increased "some" or "a good deal" as a result (table 2).[2] A higher percentage of students who took a course incorporating national issues in both years said their interest increased as a result. Twenty-nine percent (s.e. 0.6) of students took a course in both the current and previous school years and 71 percent (s.e. 1.1) of these students reported an increased interest in national issues as a result.

Differences by student characteristics and by school type. No differences in interest in national issues associated with taking a current events course were found by gender, among racial/ethnic groups, or by type of school the student attends. More students in 12th grade (71 percent), where the highest percentage reported taking such a course, said that interest increased as a result of taking the course compared to students in 9th or 10th grade (61 percent in each grade). However, this pattern did not hold for grades 8 and 11, in which taking a course that incorporated national issues also was reportedly high.

Student Reports of News-Seeking Behaviors

Two measures of news-seeking behavior that could only take place outside of the school environment were included in the NHES:96. They were watching TV news or listening to the news on the radio with parents and discussing news issues with parents. Students were asked how often they watch the national news on television or listen to the national news on the radio. A followup question for those students who indicated they watch or listen to the news at least once a month concerned whether, during the past week, they watched or listened to the national news with their parents or other adult household members. All students also were asked how often during the current school year

[2] Eighteen percent (s.e. 0.7) of students said that their interest increased "a good deal," 48 percent (s.e. 0.8) reported "some" increase, and 35 percent (s.e. 0.8) reported "not much" of an increase.

they discussed politics or national issues with their parents or other adult household members. Students who reported taking a course that generated at least some increase in interest in politics or national issues were more likely to report news-seeking behavior than were students who reported taking such a course that did not increase their interest or students who took no such course over the last 2 years (table 3 and figure 1). Students who reported some increased interest in national issues as a result of taking a course during the past 2 school years were more likely to discuss the news or watch or listen to the national news with parents than students who reported not much of an increase in interest as a result of a course. When a course incorporating national issues generated no increase in interest, reported news-seeking behavior by students was no different from that of students not taking such a course.

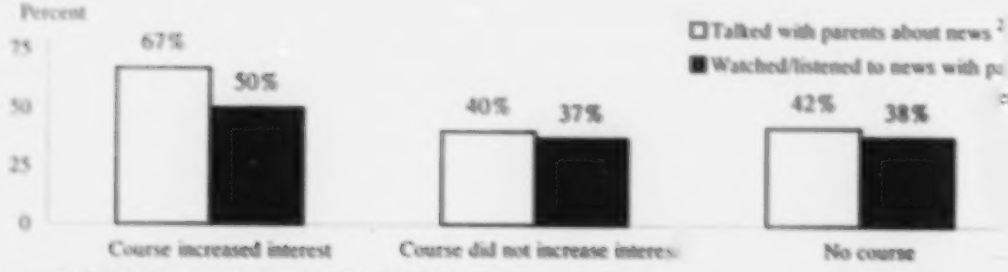
It should be noted that although heightened interest generated by courses related to government, politics, or national issues is associated with an increase in student news-seeking behavior, the observed relationship may also be the result of a greater likelihood of students with a high interest in current events choosing to enroll in courses related to those topics.

Summary

About half the 6th through 12th grade students surveyed reported taking a class during the current school year in which they were required to pay attention to government, politics or national issues. This is relatively consistent with research that found 55 percent of middle and high school students took a current events class in school (Anderman and Johnston 1994b). Seventy percent of the students said they took at least one such course over the past 2 years. Nearly two-thirds of these students reported that their interest in national issues had increased as a result of the courses incorporating national issues in which they participated, an encouraging finding for educators.

There was no difference by school type in taking courses related to national issues. Approximately the same percentage of students in public and private schools reported taking such a course during the current school year and during the last school year. Increased interest in courses at school also was not distinguishable by school type.

Figure 1.—Percent of students in grades 6 through 12[1] who reported news-seeking behavior and reported increase in interest in politics or national issues as a result of taking a course that incorporates those issues: 1996



[1]Youth who were being schooled at home are not included.
[2]Students discussed national news with parents or other adult household members at least once a month during the current school ye
[3]Students and parents or other adult household members watched national news on television together or listened together to natio
the radio during the past week.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, 1996,
Involvement component.

Students who took a course and reported that their interest increased as a result were more likely to seek news in other ways, by listening to national news on the radio or watching the news on TV with their parents or discussing the news at home with their parents, than were students who took courses incorporating national issues that did not generate increased interest or students who did not take such a course in the last 2 years.

Future research to build on these findings from the NHES:96 should continue to explore the role of education in preparing young people for responsible citizenship. This report sheds some light on student perception of course presentation. Studies should address in more detail the characteristics of courses that require students to pay attention to national issues and the teaching style employed in those courses. Other research has suggested that in schools where students and staff reported high interest in current events, teachers often discussed important news stories with students and presented news broadcasts during an academic setting, rather than during lunch or home room (Johnston 1995). Including specifics about course presentation with student-reported interest and news-seeking behavior outside of the classroom would be a useful way to assess the National Education Goal for more curricular emphasis on citizenship education.

Survey Methodology and Data Reliability

The 1996 National Household Education Survey (NHES:96) is a telephone survey conducted for the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, by Westat. Data collection took place from January through April of 1996. The sample was selected using list-assisted, random-digit-dialing (RDD) methods and is nationally representative of all civilian, noninstitutionalized persons in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Data were collected using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology.

The Youth Civic Involvement component of the NHES:96, which is the basis of this report, employed a sample of students in grades 6 through 12. Up to three instruments were used to collect data on the school and family experiences of these students. A household screening interview (called the Screener), administered to an adult member of the household, was used to determine whether any children of the appropriate ages or grades lived in the household, to collect information on each household member, and to identify the appropriate parent/guardian respondent for the sampled child. For sampling purposes, children residing in the household were grouped into younger children, age 3 through grade 5, and older children, in grades 6 though 12. One younger child and one older child from each household could have been sampled for the NHES:96. If the household contained more than one younger child or more than one older child, one from each category was randomly sampled as an interview subject. For households with youth in 6th through 12th grade who were sampled for the survey, an interview was conducted with the parent/guardian most knowledgeable about the care and education of the youth, and following completion of that interview and receipt of parental permission, an interview also was conducted with the youth. This report was based on the responses of these students.

Response Rates

For the NHES:96 survey, Screeners were completed with 55,838 households, of which 10,931 contained a child sampled for the Youth Civic Involvement component. The response rate for the Screener was 69.9 percent. An interview with a sampled youth was attempted only after the interview with his or her parent had been completed. The completion rate for the youth in 6th through 12th grade was 76.4 percent. The overall response rate for youth, the product of the Screener and youth interview completion rate, was 53.4 percent. For the NHES:96, item nonresponse (the failure to complete some items in an otherwise completed interview) was very low. Through a hot-deck procedure, responses were imputed for missing values (i.e., "don't know" or "refused," for items not specifically designated to have those legitimate response categories, or "not ascertained"). As a result, no missing values remain. The item nonresponse rates for variables in this report ranged from less than 1 percent to about 1 percent. For more information about data collection procedures and

response rates, see Collins et al. (forthcoming from NCES.)

Data Reliability

Estimates produced using data from the NHES:96 are subject to two types of error, sampling and nonsampling errors. Nonsampling errors are errors made in the collection and processing of data. Sampling errors occur because the data are collected from a sample rather than a census of the population.

Nonsampling Errors

Nonsampling error is the term used to describe variations in the estimates that may be caused by population coverage limitations and data collection, processing, and reporting procedures. The sources of nonsampling errors are typically problems like unit and item nonresponse, the differences in respondents' interpretations of the meaning of the questions, response differences related to the particular time the survey was conducted, and mistakes in data preparation.

In general, it is difficult to identify and estimate either the amount of nonsampling error or the bias caused by this error. In the NHES survey, efforts were made to prevent such errors from occurring and to compensate for them where possible. For instance, during the survey design phase, focus groups and cognitive laboratory interviews were conducted for the purpose of assessing respondent knowledge of the topics, comprehension of questions and terms, and the sensitivity of items. The design phase also entailed more than 500 staff hours of CATI instrument testing and a multi-phase field test in which about 3,200 Screeners, over 950 parent interviews, about 300 youth interviews, and about 40 adult interviews were conducted.

An important nonsampling error for a telephone survey is the failure to include persons who do not live in households with telephones. About 93.3 percent of all students in grades 1 through 12 live in households with telephones. Estimation procedures were used to reduce the bias in the estimates associated with youth who do not live in households with telephones. For more information about coverage issues and estimation procedures, see Brick and Burke (1992) and Montaquila and Brick (forthcoming from NCES).

Sampling Errors

The sample of households with telephones selected for the NHES:96 is just one of many possible samples that could have been selected. Therefore, estimates produced from the NHES:96 sample may differ from estimates that would have been produced from other samples. This type of variability is called sampling error because it arises from using a sample of households with telephones, rather than all households with telephones.

The standard error is a measure of the variability due to sampling when estimating a statistic; standard errors for estimates presented in this report were computed using a jackknife replication method. Standard errors can be used as a measure of the precision expected from a particular sample. The probability that a complete census count would differ from the sample estimate by less than 1 standard error is about 68 percent. The chance that the difference would be less than 1.65 standard errors is about 90 percent; and that the difference would be less than 1.96 standard errors, about 95 percent.

Standard errors for all of the estimates are presented in the tables. These standard errors can be used to produce confidence intervals. For example, an estimated 50 percent of 7th grade students reported taking a course this year. This figure has an estimated standard error of 1.5. Therefore, the estimated 95 percent confidence interval for this statistic is approximately 47 to 53 percent.

The tests of significance used in this analysis are based on Student's *t* statistics. As the number of comparisons at the same significance level increases, it becomes more likely that at least one of the estimated differences will be significant merely by chance, that is, it will be erroneously identified as different from zero. Even when there is no statistical difference between the means or percentages being compared, there is a 5 percent chance of getting a significant *t* value of 1.96 from sampling error alone. As the number of comparisons increases, the chance of making this type of error also increases.

A Bonferroni adjustment was used to correct significance tests for multiple comparisons. This method adjusts the significance level for the total number of comparisons made with a particular classification variable. All the differences cited in this report are significant at the 0.05 level of significance after a Bonferroni adjustment.

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Table 1.—Percent of stu
issues, by students in grades 6 though 12 who reported taking a course incorporating national
lent and school characteristics: 1996

Characteristic	Number of students[1]	Course this school year		Course last school year		Course in either year	
	thousands)	Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.
Total	25,726	52	0.7	47	0.7	70	0.6
Student's sex							
Male	13,189	51	0.9	45	1.0	68	0.9
Female	12,537	53	1.0	49	0.9	72	0.9
Race/ethnicity							
White, non-Hispanic	17,322	52	0.8	47	0.9	70	0.7
Black, non-Hispanic	4,112	58	1.8	50	2.3	74	1.7
Hispanic	3,281	44	1.9	42	2.0	63	2.0
Other race/ethnicity	1,012	53	3.1	44	3.3	69	3.0
Student's grade[2]							
6	3,946	42	1.6	33	1.8	56	1.8
7	3,893	50	1.5	39	1.8	63	1.4
8	3,696	63	1.8	49	1.8	74	1.6
9	3,740	45	2.1	55	1.9	73	1.5
10	3,689	41	1.9	47	2.0	66	2.1
11	3,386	56	1.5	47	1.8	73	1.4
12	3,374	68	2.1	62	2.0	88	1.3
School type							
Public	23,343	52	0.7	47	0.7	70	0.7
Private	2,383	52	2.7	49	2.5	70	2.4

[1]Youth who were being schooled at home are not included.
[2]One case was coded ungraded, no equivalent. It was not included in this analysis.
NOTE: s.e. is standard error. Numbers may not add to totals because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, spring 1996, Youth Civic Involvement component.

Table 2.—Percent of students who reported taking a course incorporating national issues in the last 2 years who said their interest in national issues increased some or a good deal as a result, by student and school characteristics: 1996

Characteristic	Number of students[1] (thousands)	Interest in national issues increased	
		Percent	s.e.
Total	17,986	65	0.8
Student's sex			
Male	8,980	67	1.1
Female	9,006	64	1.2
Race/ethnicity			
White, non-Hispanic	12,161	66	1.0
Black, non-Hispanic	3,048	60	2.4
Hispanic	2,082	66	2.2
Other race/ethnicity	695	65	3.4
Student's grade[2]			
6	2,192	65	2.5
7	2,451	67	2.0
8	2,727	66	2.0
9	2,744	61	1.9
10	2,434	61	2.3
11	2,464	65	2.2
12	2,973	71	1.9
School type			
Public	16,313	65	0.8
Private	1,673	69	2.2

[1]Youth who were schooled at home are not included.
[2]One case was coded as ungraded, no equivalent. It was not included in this analysis.
NOTE: s.e. is standard error. Numbers may not add to totals because of rounding. Students could have taken a course during the current school year or in the past school year.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, spring 1996, Youth Civic Involvement component.

Table 3.—Percent of students in grades 6 through 12 who reported news-seeking behavior, by reported increase in interest in politics or national issues as a result of taking a course incorporating national issues in school: 1996

Characteristic	Number of students[1] (thousands)	Talk with parents about national news[2]		Watch/listen to national news with parents[3]	
		Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.
Total	25,726	53	0.7	44	0.7
Course increased interest	11,731	67	1.0	50	1.0
Course did not increase interest	6,255	40	1.3	37	1.5
No course	7,740	42	1.1	38	1.4

[1]Youth who were schooled at home are not included.
[2]Students discussed national news with parents or other adult household members at least once a month during the current school year.
[3]Students and parents or other adult household members watched national news on television together or listened together to national news on the radio during the past week.
NOTE: s.e. is standard error.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, spring 1996, Youth Civic Involvement component.

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